

The Immortal

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration. It depicts a Gothic cathedral at night, illuminated by a warm, golden light that creates a strong contrast with the surrounding darkness. The architecture is highly detailed, with intricate carvings and spires. In the foreground, a large, dark column stands on the left, and a figure is seated on the ground, looking towards the cathedral. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

Jorge Luis Borges

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PREFACE

Solomon saith: *There is no new thing upon the earth. So that as Plato had an imagination, that all knowledge was but remembrance; so Solomon giveth his sentence, that all novelty is but oblivion.*

Francis Bacon: *Essays*, LVII

In London, in early June of the year 1929, the rare book dealer Joseph Cartaphilus, of Smyrna, offered the princessde Lucingethe six quarto minor volumes (1715-1720) of Pope's *Iliad*. The princess purchased them; when she took possession of them, she exchanged a few words with the dealer. He was, she says, an emaciated, grimy man with gray eyes and gray beard and singularly vague features. He expressed himself with untutored and uncorrected fluency in several languages; within scant minutes he shifted from French to English and from English to an enigmatic cross between the Spanish of Salonika and the Portuguese of Macao. In October, the princess heard from a passenger on the *Zeus* that Cartaphilus had died at sea while returning to Smyrna, and that he had been buried on the island of Ios.

In the last volume of the *Iliad* she found this manuscript.

It is written in an English that teems with Latinisms; this is a verbatim transcription of the document.

I

As I recall, my travails began in a garden in hundred-gated Thebes, in the time of the emperor Diocletian. I had fought (with no glory) in the recent Egyptian wars and was tribune of a legion quartered in Berenice, on the banks of the Red Sea; there, fever and magic consumed many men who magnanimously coveted the steel blade. The Mauritians were defeated; the lands once occupied by the rebel cities were dedicated *in aeternitatem* to the Plutonian gods; Alexandria, subdued, in vain sought Caesar's mercy; within the year the legions were to report their triumph, but I myself barely glimpsed the face of Mars. That privation grieved me, and was perhaps why I threw myself into the quest, through vagrant and terrible deserts, for the secret City of the Immortals.

My travails, I have said, began in a garden in Thebes. All that night I did not sleep, for there was a combat in my heart. I rose at last a little before dawn. My slaves were sleeping; the moon was the color of the infinite sand. A bloody rider was approaching from the east, weak with exhaustion. A few steps from me, he dismounted and in a faint, insatiable voice asked me, in Latin, the name of the river whose waters laved the city's walls. I told him it was the Egypt, fed by the rains. "It is another river that I seek," he replied morosely, "*the secret river that purifies men of death.*" Dark blood was welling from his breast. He told me that the country of his birth was a mountain that lay beyond the Ganges; it was rumored on that mountain, he told me, that if one traveled westward, to the end of the world, one would come to the river whose waters give immortality. He added that on the far shore of that river lay the City of the Immortals, a city rich in bulwarks and amphitheaters and temples. He died before dawn, but I resolved to go in quest of that city and its river. When interrogated by the torturer, some of the Mauritanian prisoners confirmed the traveler's tale: One of them recalled the Elysian plain, far at the ends of the earth, where men's lives are everlasting;

another, the peaks from which the Pactolus flows, upon which men live for a hundred years. In Rome, I spoke with philosophers who felt that to draw out the span of a man's life was to draw out the agony of his dying and multiply the number of his deaths. I am not certain whether I ever believed in the City of the Immortals; I think the task of finding it was enough for me. Flavius, the Getulian proconsul, entrusted two hundred soldiers to me for the venture; I also recruited a number of mercenaries who claimed they knew the roads, and who were the first to desert.

Subsequent events have so distorted the memory of our first days that now they are impossible to put straight. We set out from Arsinoë and entered the ardent desert. We crossed the lands of the Troglodytes, who devour serpents and lack all verbal commerce; the land of the Garamantas, whose women are held in common and whose food is lions; the land of the Augiles, who worship only Tartarus.

We ranged the width and breadth of other deserts—deserts of black sand, where the traveler must usurp the hours of the night, for the fervency of the day is unbearable. From afar I made out the mountain which gives its name to the Ocean; on its slopes grows the euphorbia, an antidote to poisons, and on its peak live the Satyrs, a nation of wild and rustic men given to lasciviousness. That the bosom of those barbaric lands, where the Earth is the mother of monsters, might succor a famous city—such a thing seemed unthinkable to us all. Thus we continued with our march, for to have regressed would have been to dishonor ourselves. Some of the men, those who were most temerarious, slept with their faces exposed to the moon; soon they burned with fever. With the depraved water of the watering holes others drank up insanity and death. Then began the desertions; a short time afterward, the mutinies. In repressing them I did not hesitate to employ severity. In that I acted justly, but a centurion warned me that the mutineers (keen to avenge the crucifixion of one of their number) were weaving a plot for my death. I fled the camp with the few soldiers who were loyal to me; in

the desert, among whirlwinds of sand and the vast night, we became separated. A Cretan arrow rent my flesh. For several days I wandered without finding water—or one huge day multiplied by the sun, thirst, and the fear of thirst. I left my path to the will of my horse. At dawn, the distance bristled with pyramids and towers. I dreamed, unbearably, of a small and orderly labyrinth at whose center lay a well; my hands could almost touch it, my eyes see it, but so bewildering and entangled were the turns that I knew I would die before I reached it.

II

When I disentangled myself at last from that nightmare, I found that my hands were bound behind my back and I was lying in an oblong stone niche no bigger than a common grave, scraped into the caustic slope of a mountain. The sides of the cavity were humid, and had been polished as much by time as by human hands. In my chest I felt a painful throbbing, and I burned with thirst. I raised my head and cried out weakly. At the foot of the mountain ran a noiseless, impure stream, clogged by sand and rubble; on the far bank, the patent City of the Immortals shone dazzlingly in the last (or first) rays of the sun. I could see fortifications, arches, frontispieces, and forums; the foundation of it all was a stone plateau. A hundred or more irregular niches like my own riddled the mountain and the valley. In the sand had been dug shallow holes; from those wretched holes, from the niches, emerged naked men with gray skin and neglected beards. I thought I recognized these men: they belonged to the bestial lineage of the Troglodytes, who infest the shorelines of the Persian Gulf and the grottoes of Ethiopia; I was surprised neither by the fact that they did not speak nor by seeing them devour serpents.

Urgent thirst lent me temerity. I estimated that I was some thirty paces from the sand; I closed my eyes and threw myself down the mountain, my hands bound behind my back. I plunged my bloodied face into the dark water and lapped at it like an animal. Before I lost myself in sleep and delirium once more, I inexplicably repeated a few words of Greek: *Those from Zeleia, wealthy Trojans, who drink the water of dark Aisepos...*

I cannot say how many days and nights passed over me. In pain, unable to return to the shelter of the caverns, naked on the unknown sand, I let the moon and the sun cast lots for my bleak fate. The Troglodytes, childlike in their barbarity, helped me neither survive nor die. In vain did I plead with them to kill me. One day,

with the sharp edge of a flake of rock, I severed my bonds. The next, I stood up and was able to beg or steal—I, Marcus Flaminius Rufus, military tribune of one of the legions of Rome—my first abominated mouthful of serpent's flesh.

Out of avidity to see the Immortals, to touch that more than human City, I could hardly sleep. And as though the Troglodytes could divine my goal, they did not sleep, either. At first I presumed they were keeping a watch over me; later, I imagined that my uneasiness had communicated itself to them, as dogs can be infected in that way. For my departure from the barbarous village I chose the most public of times, sunset, when almost all the men emerged from their holes and crevices in the earth and gazed out unseeingly toward the west. I prayed aloud, less to plead for divine favor than to intimidate the tribe with articulate speech. I crossed the stream bed clogged with sandbars and turned my steps toward the City.

Two or three men followed me confusedly; they were of short stature (like the others of that species), and inspired more revulsion than fear. I had to skirt a number of irregular pits that I took to be ancient quarries; misled by the City's enormous size, I had thought it was much nearer. Toward midnight, I set my foot upon the black shadow—bristling with idolatrous shapes upon the yellow sand—of the City's wall. My steps were halted by a kind of sacred horror. So abhorred by mankind are novelty and the desert that I was cheered to note that one of the Troglodytes had accompanied me to the last. I closed my eyes and waited, unsleeping, for the dawn.

I have said that the City was builded on a stone plateau. That plateau, with its precipitous sides, was as difficult to scale as the walls. In vain did my weary feet walk round it; the black foundation revealed not the slightest irregularity, and the invariance of the walls proscribed even a single door. The force of the day drove me to seek refuge in a cavern; toward the rear there was a pit, and out of the pit, out of the gloom below, rose a ladder. I descended the ladder and made my way through a chaos of squalid galleries to a vast, indistinct circular chamber. Nine doors opened into that cellarlike

place; eight led to a maze that returned, deceitfully, to the same chamber; the ninth led through another maze to a second circular chamber identical to the first. I am not certain how many chambers there were; my misery and anxiety multiplied them. The silence was hostile, and virtually perfect; aside from a subterranean wind whose cause I never discovered, within those deep webs of stone there was no sound; even the thin streams of iron-colored water that trickled through crevices in the stone were noiseless. Horribly, I grew used to that dubious world; it began to seem incredible that anything could exist save nine-doored cellars and long, forking subterranean corridors. I know not how long I wandered under the earth; I do know that from time to time, in a confused dream of home, I conflated the horrendous village of the barbarians and the city of my birth, among the clusters of grapes.

At the end of one corridor, a not unforeseen wall blocked my path—and a distant light fell upon me. I raised my dazzled eyes; above, vertiginously high above, I saw a circle of sky so blue it was almost purple. The metal treads of a stairway led up the wall. Weariness made my muscles slack, but I climbed the stairs, only pausing from time to time to sob clumsily with joy. Little by little I began to discern friezes and the capitals of columns, triangular pediments and vaults, confused glories carved in granite and marble. Thus it was that I was led to ascend from the blind realm of black and intertwining labyrinths into the brilliant City.

I emerged into a kind of small plaza—a courtyard might better describe it. It was surrounded by a single building, of irregular angles and varying heights. It was to this heterogeneous building that the many cupolas and columns belonged. More than any other feature of that incredible monument, I was arrested by the great antiquity of its construction. I felt that it had existed before humankind, before the world itself.

Its patent antiquity (though somehow terrible to the eyes) seemed to accord with the labor of immortal artificers. Cautiously at first, with indifference as time went on, desperately toward the end, I

wandered the staircases and inlaid floors of that labyrinthine palace. (I discovered afterward that the width and height of the treads on the staircases were not constant; it was this that explained the extraordinary weariness I felt.) *This palace is the work of the gods*, was my first thought. I explored the uninhabited spaces, and I corrected myself: *The gods that built this place have died*. Then I reflected upon its peculiarities, and told myself: *The gods that built this place were mad*. I said this, I know, in a tone of incomprehensible reproof that verged upon remorse—with more intellectual horror than sensory fear.

The impression of great antiquity was joined by others: the impression of endlessness, the sensation of oppressiveness and horror, the sensation of complex irrationality. I had made my way through a dark maze, but it was the bright City of the Immortals that terrified and repelled me. A maze is a house built purposely to confuse men; its architecture, prodigal in symmetries, is made to serve that purpose. In the palace that I imperfectly explored, the architecture had no purpose. There were corridors that led nowhere, unreachably high windows, grandly dramatic doors that opened onto monklike cells or empty shafts, incredible upside-down staircases with upside-down treads and balustrades. Other staircases, clinging airily to the side of a monumental wall, petered out after two or three landings, in the high gloom of the cupolas, arriving nowhere. I cannot say whether these are literal examples I have given; I do know that for many years they plagued my troubled dreams; I can no longer know whether any given feature is a faithful transcription of reality or one of the shapes unleashed by my nights. *This City, I thought, is so horrific that its mere existence, the mere fact of its having endured – even in the middle of a secret desert – pollutes the past and the future and somehow compromises the stars. So long as this City endures, no one in the world can ever be happy or courageous.* I do not want to describe it; a chaos of heterogeneous words, the body of a tiger or a bull pullulating with teeth, organs,

and heads monstrously yoked together yet hating each other—those might, perhaps, be approximate images.

I cannot recall the stages by which I returned, nor my path through the dusty, humid crypts. I know only that I was accompanied by the constant fear that when I emerged from the last labyrinth I would be surrounded once again by the abominable City of the Immortals. I remember nothing else. That loss of memory, now insurmountable, was perhaps willful; it is possible that the circumstances of my escape were so unpleasant that on some day no less lost to memory I swore to put them out of my mind.

III

Those who have read the story of my travails attentively will recall that a man of the Troglodyte tribe had followed me, as a dog might have, into the jagged shadow of the walls. When I emerged from the last cellar, I found him at the mouth of the cavern. He was lying in the sand, clumsily drawing and rubbing out a row of symbols that resembled those letters in dreams that one is just on the verge of understanding when they merge and blur. At first I thought that this was some sort of barbaric writing; then I realized that it was absurd to imagine that men who had never learned to speak should have invented writing.

Nor did any one of the shapes resemble any other—a fact that ruled out (or made quite remote) the possibility that they were symbols. The man would draw them, look at them, and correct them. Then suddenly, as though his game irritated him, he would rub them out with his palm and forearm. He looked up at me, though he seemed not to recognize me. Still, so great was the relief I felt (or so great, so dreadful had my loneliness been) that I actually thought that this primitive Troglodyte looking up at me from the floor of a cave had been waiting for me. The sun warmed the plain; as we began our return to the village, under the first stars of evening, the sand burned our feet. The Troglodyte walked ahead of me; that night I resolved to teach him to recognize, perhaps even to repeat, a few words. Dogs and horses, I reflected, are able to do the first; many birds, like the Caesars' nightingale, can do the second.

However scant a man's understanding, it will always be greater than that of unreasoning beasts.

The Troglodyte's lowly birth and condition recalled to my memory the image of Argos, the moribund old dog of the *Odyssey*, so I gave him the name Argos, and tried to teach it to him. Time and time again, I failed. No means I employed, no severity, no obstinacy of mine availed. Motionless, his eyes dead, he seemed not even to

perceive the sounds which I was attempting to imprint upon him. Though but a few paces from me, he seemed immensely distant. Lying in the sand like a small, battered sphinx carved from lava, he allowed the heavens to circle in the sky above him from the first dusky light of morning to the last dusky light of night. It seemed simply impossible that he had not grasped my intention. I recalled that it is generally believed among the Ethiopians that monkeys deliberately do not speak, so that they will not be forced to work; I attributed Argos' silence to distrust or fear. From that vivid picture I passed on to others, even more extravagant. I reflected that Argos and I lived our lives in separate universes; I reflected that our perceptions were identical but that Argos combined them differently than I, constructed from them different objects; I reflected that perhaps for him there were no objects, but rather a constant, dizzying play of swift impressions. I imagined a world without memory, without time; I toyed with the possibility of a language that had no nouns, a language of impersonal verbs or indeclinable adjectives. In these reflections many days went by, and with the days, years. Until one morning, something very much like joy occurred—the sky rained slow, strong rain.

Nights in the desert can be frigid, but that night had been like a cauldron. I dreamed that a river in Thessaly (into whose waters I had thrown back a golden fish) was coming to save me; I could hear it approaching over the red sand and the black rock; a coolness in the air and the scurrying sound of rain awakened me. I ran out naked to welcome it. The night was waning; under the yellow clouds, the tribe, as joyously as I, was offering itself up to the vivid torrents in a kind of ecstasy—they reminded me of Corybantes possessed by the god. Argos, his eyes fixed on the empyrean, was moaning; streams of water rolled down his face—not just rain, but also (I later learned) tears. Argos, I cried, Argos!

Then, with gentle wonder, as though discovering something lost and forgotten for many years, Argos stammered out these words: Argos,

Ulysses' dog. And then, without looking at me, This dog lying on the dungheap.

We accept reality so readily—perhaps because we sense that nothing is real. I asked Argos how much of the *Odyssey* he knew. He found using Greek difficult; I had to repeat the question.

Very little, he replied. Less than the meagerest rhapsode. It has been eleven hundred years since last I wrote it.

IV

That day, all was revealed to me. The Troglodytes were the Immortals; the stream and its sand-laden waters, the River sought by the rider. As for the City whose renown had spread to the very Ganges, the Immortals had destroyed it almost nine hundred years ago. Out of the shattered remains of the City's ruin they had built on the same spot the incoherent city I had wandered through—that parody or antithesis of City which was also a temple to the irrational gods that rule the world and to those gods about whom we know nothing save that they do not resemble man. The founding of this city was the last symbol to which the Immortals had descended; it marks the point at which, esteeming all exertion vain, they resolved to live in thought, in pure speculation. They built that carapace, abandoned it, and went off to make their dwellings in the caves. In their selfabsorption, they scarcely perceived the physical world.

These things were explained to me by Homer as one might explain things to a child. He also told me of his own old age and of that late journey he had made—driven, like Ulysses, by the intention to arrive at the nation of men that know not what the sea is, that eat not salted meat, that know not what an oar might be. He lived for a century in the City of the Immortals, and when it was destroyed it was he who counseled that this other one be built. We should not be surprised by that—it is rumored that after singing of the war of Ilion, he sang of the war between the frogs and rats. He was like a god who created first the Cosmos, and then Chaos.

There is nothing very remarkable about being immortal; with the exception of mankind, all creatures are immortal, for they know nothing of death. What is divine, terrible, and incomprehensible is to *know* oneself immortal. I have noticed that in spite of religion, the conviction as to one's own immortality is extraordinarily rare. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all *profess* belief in immortality, but the veneration paid to the first century of life is proof that they truly

believe only in those hundred years, for they destine all the rest, throughout eternity, to rewarding or punishing what one did *when alive*. In my view, the Wheel conceived by certain religions in Hindustan is much more plausible; on that Wheel, which has neither end nor beginning, each life is the effect of the previous life and engenderer of the next, yet no one life determines the whole.... Taught by centuries of living, the republic of immortal men had achieved a perfection of tolerance, almost of disdain. They knew that over an infinitely long span of time, all things happen to all men. As reward for his past and future virtues, every man merited every kindness—yet also every betrayal, as reward for his past and future iniquities. Much as the way in games of chance, heads and tails tend to even out, so cleverness and dullness cancel and correct each other. Perhaps the rude poem of El Cid is the counterweight demanded by a single epithet of the Eclogues or a maxim from Heraclitus. The most fleeting thought obeys an invisible plan, and may crown, or inaugurate, a secret design. I know of men who have done evil in order that good may come of it in future centuries, or may already have come of it in centuries past.... Viewed in that way, all our acts are just, though also unimportant. There are no spiritual or intellectual *merits*. Homer composed the *Odyssey*; given infinite time, with infinite circumstances and changes, it is impossible that the *Odyssey* should *not* be composed at least once. No one is someone; a single immortal man is all men. Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, hero, philosopher, demon, and world— which is a long-winded way of saying that *Aim not*.

The notion of the world as a system of exact compensations had an enormous influence on the Immortals. In the first place, it made them immune to pity. I have mentioned the ancient quarries that dotted the countryside on the far bank of the stream; a man fell into the deepest of those pits; he could not be hurt, could not die, and yet he burned with thirst; seventy years passed before he was thrown a rope. Nor was he much interested in his own fate. His body was a submissive domestic animal; all the charity it required each month was a few hours' sleep, a little water, and a scrap of meat. But

let no one imagine that we were mere ascetics. There is no more complex pleasure than thought, and it was to thought that we delivered ourselves over. From time to time, some extraordinary stimulus might bring us back to the physical world—for example, on that dawn, the ancient elemental pleasure of the rain. But those lapses were extremely rare; all Immortals were capable of perfect quietude. I recall one whom I never saw standing—a bird had made its nest on his breast.

Among the corollaries to the doctrine that there is no thing that is not counterbalanced by another, there is one that has little theoretical importance but that caused us, at the beginning or end of the tenth century, to scatter over the face of the earth. It may be summarized in these words: *There is a river whose waters give immortality; somewhere there must be another river whose waters take it away.* The number of rivers is not infinite; an immortal traveler wandering the world will someday have drunk from them all. We resolved to find that river.

Death (or reference to death) makes men precious and pathetic; their ghostliness is touching; any act they perform may be their last; there is no face that is not on the verge of blurring and fading away like the faces in a dream. Everything in the world of mortals has the value of the irrecoverable and contingent.

Among the Immortals, on the other hand, every act (every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, and the faithful presage of others that will repeat it in the future, *advertiginem*. There is nothing that is not as though lost between indefatigable mirrors. Nothing can occur but once, nothing is preciously *in peril of being lost*. The elegiac, the somber, the ceremonial are not modes the Immortals hold in reverence. Homer and I went our separate ways at the portals of Tangier; I do not think we said good-bye.

I wandered through new realms, new empires. In the autumn of 1066 I fought at Stamford Bridge, though I no longer recall whether I

stood in the ranks of Harold, soon to meet his fate, or in the ranks of that ill-fated Harald Hardrada who conquered only six feet or a little more of English soil. In the seventh century of the Hegira, on the outskirts of Bulaq, I transcribed with deliberate calligraphy, in a language I have forgotten, in an alphabet I know not, the seven voyages of Sindbad and the story of the City of Brass. In a courtyard of the prison in Samarkand I often played chess. In Bikanir I have taught astrology, as I have in Bohemia. In 1638 I was in Kolzsvar, and later in Leipzig. In Aberdeen, in 1714, I subscribed to the six volumes of Pope's *Iliad*; I know I often perused them with delight. In 1729 or thereabouts, I discussed the origin of that poem with a professor of rhetoric whose name, I believe, was Giambattista; his arguments struck me as irrefutable. On October 4, 1921, the *Patna*, which was taking me to Bombay, ran aground in a harbor on the Eritrean coast.¹

I disembarked; there came to my mind other mornings, long in the past, when I had also looked out over the Red Sea—when I was a Roman tribune, and fever and magic and inactivity consumed the soldiers. Outside the city I saw a spring; impelled by habit, I tasted its clear water. As I scaled the steep bank beside it, a thorny tree scratched the back of my hand. The unaccustomed pain seemed exceedingly sharp. Incredulous, speechless, and in joy, I contemplated the precious formation of a slow drop of blood. *I am once more mortal*, I told myself over and over, *again I am like all other men*. That night, I slept until daybreak.

... A year has passed, and I reread these pages. I can attest that they do not stray beyond the bounds of truth, although in the first chapters, and even in certain paragraphs of others, I believe I detect a certain falseness. That is due, perhaps, to an over-employment of circumstantial details, a way of writing that I learned from poets; it is a procedure that infects everything with falseness, since there may be a wealth of details in the event, yet not in memory.... I believe, nonetheless, that I have discovered a more private and inward

1 Part of the ms. is scratched out just here; the name of the port may have been erased.

reason. I will reveal it; it does not matter that I may be judged a fantast.

The story I have told seems unreal because the experiences of two different men are intermingled in it. In the first chapter, the horseman wishes to know the name of the river that runs beside the walls of Thebes; Flaminius Rufus, who had bestowed upon the city the epithet "hundred-gated," tells him that the river is the "Egypt"; neither of those statements belongs to *him*, but rather to Homer, who in the *Iliad* expressly mentions "Thebes Hekatompylos" and who in the *Odyssey*, through the mouths of Proteus and Ulysses, invariably calls the Nile the "Egypt." In the second chapter, when the Roman drinks the immortal water he speaks a few words in Greek. Those words are also Homeric; they may be found at the end of the famous catalog of the ships. Later, in the dizzying palace, he speaks of "a reproof that was almost remorse"; those words, too, belong to Homer, who had foreseen such a horror. Such anomalies disturbed me; others, of an aesthetic nature, allowed me to discover the truth. The clues of this latter type may be found in the last chapter, which says that I fought at Stamford Bridge, that in Bulaq I transcribed the voyages of Sindbad the Sailor, and that in Aberdeen I subscribed to Pope's English *Iliad*.

The text says, *inter alia*: "In Bikanir I have taught astrology, as I have in Bohemia." None of those statements is false; what is significant is the fact of their having been chosen to record. The first seems to befit a man of war, but then one sees that the narrator pays little attention to the war, much more to the fate of the men. The "facts" that follow are even more curious. A dark yet elemental reason led me to put them to paper: I knew they were pathetic. They are not pathetic when narrated by the Roman Flaminius Rufus; they are when narrated by Homer. It is odd that Homer, in the thirteenth century, should have copied down the adventures of Sindbad—another Ulysses—and again after many hundreds of years have discovered forms like those of his own *Iliad* in a northern kingdom and a barbaric tongue. As for the sentence that contains the name

"Bikanir," one can see that it has been composed by a man of letters desirous (like the author of the catalog of ships) of wielding splendid words.²

As the end approaches, there are no longer any images from memory— there are only words. It is not strange that time may have confused those that once portrayed me with those that were symbols of the fate of *the person that accompanied me for so many centuries*. I have been Homer; soon, like Ulysses, I shall be Nobody; soon, I shall be all men—I shall be dead.

Postscript (1950): Among the commentaries inspired by the foregoing publication, the most curious (if not most urbane) is biblically titled *A Coat of Many Colours* (Manchester, 1948); it is the work of the supremely persévérant pen of Dr. Nahum Cordovero, and contains some hundred pages. It speaks of the Greek anthologies, of the anthologies of late Latin texts, of that Ben Johnson who defined his contemporaries with excerpts from Seneca, of Alexander Ross's *Virgilius evangelizans*, of the artifices of George Moore and Eliot, and, finally, of "the tale attributed to the rare-book dealer Joseph Cartaphilus." In the first chapter it points out brief interpolations from Pliny (*Historia naturate*, V:8); in the second, from Thomas de Quincey (*Writings*, III: 439); in the third, from a letter written by Descartes to the ambassador Pierre Chanut; in the fourth, from Bernard Shaw (*Back to Methuselah*, V). From those "intrusions" (or thefts) it infers that the entire document is apocryphal.

To my way of thinking, that conclusion is unacceptable. As *the end approaches*, wrote Cartaphilus, *there are no longer any images from memory – there are only words*. Words, words, words taken out of place and mutilated, words from other men—those were the alms left him by the hours and the centuries.

For Cecilia Ingenieros

2 Ernesto Sabato suggests that the "Giambattista" who discussed the origins of the Iliad with the rare book dealer Cartaphilus is Giambattista Vico, the Italian who defended the argument that Homer is a symbolic character, like Pluto or Achilles.